

Business Plan

Zapata Falls Campground

BLM La Jara Field Office
San Luis Valley Public Lands Center
La Jara, Colorado
Congressional District 3

Fee Site Description

Zapata Falls campground is located within the Zapata Falls Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA), a destination for visitors to Zapata Falls managed by the La Jara Field Office and located near Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve along the Sangre de Cristo mountain range in the San Luis Valley of south-central Colorado, and is the result of an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act project begun in 2010. As of September 2010, the campground is currently under construction. The new campground is expected to be completed around June of 2011 and will consist of 25 sites (with tent pads, fire rings and tables), including a tent site loop, an RV loop, a camp host site, a group site, information and interpretation kiosks, a water system, 2 vault toilets, trash service, and connectivity to a local trail system and picnic area.

The Record of Decision for the approved San Luis Resource Area Management Plan (RMP) was signed by the Associate State Director of the BLM on December 18, 1991. The approved RMP included a land use allocation decision that designated the Zapata Falls SRMA (6,302 acres) to be managed for intensive recreation. The Zapata Falls SRMA is located at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain range in southern Colorado about five miles south of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. Public access to Zapata Falls and the development of the parking and day use areas on public lands occurred in the 1990's and was a cooperative effort that involved fourteen agencies. The actual waterfall is located on State Land Board lands, which are in the process of being transferred to BLM in a land trade with the Colorado State Land Board.

Based on data collected in 2010, approximately 104,000 people visited Zapata Falls SRMA. Though Zapata Falls is a BLM recreation site, visitation to the SRMA is strongly influenced by Great Sand Dunes NP, which heavily markets Zapata Falls to its visitors almost as an extension of the Park itself. Though the Park, due to its proximity and marketing strategy, is responsible for much of the visitation to Zapata Falls, the area is popular in general as a destination because of the nearly year-round easily accessible, low-elevation waterfall, which is also located along the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway.

Increased visitation to Zapata Falls is a trend that is expected to continue due to increased visitation to Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve (which previously was a National Monument), increasing participation in driving for pleasure and sightseeing, the promotion of Zapata Falls as a heritage tourism destination by the

Colorado Tourism Office (CTO) (and by association promotion by CTO as part of the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway), and increasing population projections for the country as a whole, the West, and especially Colorado in the years ahead. Increased use of age-related (Golden Age or America the Beautiful-Senior) passes is also expected as baby-boomers continue to reach eligibility requirements.

Site Facilities

Facilities at Zapata Falls campground will consist of 25 sites (9 drive-in tent sites, 14 RV sites, 1 camp host site, 1 group site - all with tent pads, fire rings and tables), 2 vault toilets, trash receptacles, a water system, and connectivity to a local trail system and picnic area. An information kiosk and a fee station provide visitors an opportunity to view interpretive panels, learn the rules and regulations that apply to the area and pay for their campsites. The contact person is Sean Noonan of the Saguache Field Office at (719) 655-6136.

Visitor Demographics

The primary market-based strategy identified for the Zapata Falls SRMA is a destination strategy. The Zapata Falls SRMA is located in an area where national, regional and local visitors value public lands as recreation-tourism destinations. The Zapata Falls SRMA is part of a complex of government owned lands administered by the Park Service, Forest Service, Colorado State Parks and BLM, all of which are located in close proximity to one another. Visitors are attracted to this area to visit Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness Area, Blanca Wetlands, Zapata Falls and San Luis Lakes.

The primary market consists of families and friends from Colorado and the adjacent states who come to the area to visit the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve but who are also interested in visiting other destinations in close proximity to the park. These visitors are interested in participating in a wide variety of activities which includes sight seeing, hiking, camping, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, picnicking, backpacking, hunting, fishing and horseback riding. Many local families have visited Zapata Falls for generations and have a strong attraction to the area.

Recreation Use

As defined by the 2009 Zapata Falls SRMA Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP), four distinct Recreation Management Zones (RMZs) were identified in the Zapata Falls SRMA. These include zone number 1 which includes the network of trails below the day use area, zone number 2 which encompasses the day use trails, zone number 3 which is the trail to the Wilderness, and zone 4 which encompasses the campground.

Recreation Management Zone #4

RMZ Objective and Activities: To provide opportunities for camping on a low development scale. While camping, it is hoped that visitors will have a feeling of escaping everyday responsibilities for a while, and enjoy the closeness of family and

friends. While hiking, it is hoped that visitors will enjoy a closeness of nature. Visitors should benefit from the area through; a restored mind from unwanted stress and greater family bonding. The environmental benefits are improved maintenance of physical facilities and reduction of impacts from illegal camping in the day use area. The economic benefits are increased local tourism revenue and greater fiscal capacity to maintain infrastructure and services.

Financial Analysis (Costs and Revenues)

Revenues: Projected annual revenue (based on approval of the proposed fee and an assumption of when the CG is actually completed, and based on current visitor use) at Zapata Falls CG is expected to be around \$10,000 in FY11.

Operations & Maintenance: Fee expenditures for O&M utilizing fee revenues are expected to be around \$3,475 in FY11 - \$500 for supplies (including water system compliance and testing expenses), \$1,000 for water hauling for the CG cistern water system, \$275 for CG maintenance worker salary for fee collections, \$200 for maintenance equipment, and \$1,500 for toilet pumping. A significant amount of operations and maintenance costs will be covered by regular appropriated funds (especially by a one-time add on of \$45,000 to the recreation budget to finish the campground development and provide for all operations and maintenance expenses in the absence of fees), and through the unique Service First agreement between the BLM San Luis Resource Area and the Rio Grande National Forest, and with a cooperative maintenance and law enforcement agreement with Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. Projected routine annual maintenance and operations expenses are expected to be similar to Penitente Canyon campground for FY 11, with the additional expense of hauling water for a cistern system (as opposed to a well).

Fair Market Value Assessment

Over 30 public lands-style developed campgrounds and one private campground/RV park from throughout the San Luis Valley (and within 50 miles of the Valley) were compared in order to develop an appropriate and sustainable fee structure suitable for the foreseeable future.

Price range:

- Rio Grande National Forest: \$5-\$16 for individual sites and \$26-\$32 for group sites (similar to other National Forest and Field Office campgrounds in surrounding areas and based on varying services and amenities).
- Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve: \$14 for individual sites and \$65-\$80 for group sites, plus park entrance fees (similar to other National Park system campgrounds in surrounding areas).
- San Luis Lake State Park: \$20/night for all campsites.
- Fun Valley RV Camping: \$24.50/night for 2 people. (Private CG's in the San Luis Valley are typically RV campgrounds with full hook-ups).

Selected fee and method: Increase from \$0 to \$11/night per individual site and \$0 to \$20/night per group site.

Rationale for Fee Changes

In order to provide sustainable, high quality visitor services at Zapata Falls campground, establishing an appropriate fee structure that is consistent with other similar campgrounds of the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center is necessary.

Objectives for Use of Fee Receipts

Additional fees would help BLM to improve visitor services by:

- Improve public safety through increased visitor services and Law Enforcement and security patrols (more on-site agency presence from Recreation and Law Enforcement personnel and volunteers/camp host).
- Improve routine and annual operations and maintenance with increased patrols, equipment and supplies (this includes providing water to the cistern system).
- Expand interpretation of cultural and natural history –this includes signs, kiosks, brochures, maps, etc.
- Improve visitor experiences by being responsive to customer desired enhancements and aesthetic improvements to the campground (includes connecting the new campground to the surrounding trail system).

Social/Economic Impacts

Overnight camping is currently not allowed at Zapata Falls, though for years people have routinely camped in the day use picnic area desiring a place to stay for the night and assuming that camping was provided at the Zapata Falls Recreation site.

Customer demand for a developed campground has been expressed by the public not only through their actions (described above), but also in focus groups conducted at Zapata Falls over the last few years.

Many visitors to Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve (most of whom are from out of state and beyond the local commuting area during the peak summer travel season) visit the Park intending to camp, which is by reservation only, and during the peak summer travel season often have no place nearby to go for a similar experience when the Park campgrounds are completely full. The Zapata Falls campground, developed under the auspices of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, is expected to augment this demand for overnight camping on public lands in a primitive setting.

Residents of the San Luis Valley, by contrast, also frequent Zapata Falls, though similar to Penitente Canyon do not plan overnight camping trips associated with their visit to the day use area, primarily to visit the waterfall or to hike or bike on the associated trails. Local area residents, again similar to Penitente Canyon CG, are not expected to utilize the overnight campground significantly because of its low elevation, easy access And close proximity to most San Luis Valley communities. Of the 517,836 acres of BLM lands in the San Luis Valley, all but 5 acres of developed campgrounds (Penitente Canyon and Zapata Falls) are free and open for dispersed camping year-round.

Given the current demand for the campground and expected low use by local area residents, it is likely that any impacts related to social or economic factors would be minimal.

Visitor Feedback Mechanisms

Visitors are able to provide feedback about Zapata Falls through focus groups conducted to determine desired setting, experiences and beneficial outcomes achieved by recreation participants, feedback from permitted groups and commercial outfitters and guides during on-site inspections and performance evaluations, comments provided to agency employees (including Law Enforcement) during visitor contacts, and comments received by Visitor Information Specialists working in the various unit offices of the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center. Plans are currently in the works to improve the local BLM website to better receive visitor feedback as well.

Public Participation

Campground visitor contacts have been documented at Penitente Canyon CG (BLM's only other developed campground in the San Luis Valley) since June, 2009. To date, all fee-paying visitors to that campground that provided comments about the proposed fee increase there have expressed understanding and the need for a fee increase in order to provide high quality customer desired visitor services. The same fee structure is being proposed at Zapata Falls campground.

A news release was submitted to local area papers, Congressional staffs, Saguache and Alamosa County Commissioners, and internally to San Luis Valley Public Lands Center employees on or before September 21, 2010. The same information was posted at information kiosks at the campground along with customer comment cards. The complete proposal will also be posted to the BLM website on or about October 1, 2010. Combined with the 5 documented Penitente Canyon campground visitor contacts, only one other comment has been received at this time, which appeared to be the result of a frustration with out of state campground hosts (presumably in concessionaire campgrounds), which exist at some locations on the neighboring Rio Grande National Forest.